AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:

This listing replaces all prior versions and listings of claims in the application.

Listing of Claims

1. (Currently Amended) A method of supplying starter cultures of consistent quality at different propagation factories or plants, comprising the steps of (i) providing inoculum material comprising starter culture organism cells, (ii) allowing the starter culture cells to propagate for a period of time sufficient to produce a desired amount of said starter culture organism cells, and (iii) harvesting the propagated cells to obtain a starter culture,

wherein step (i) comprises:

(a) concentrating said inoculum material of step (i) to obtain a concentrated stock inoculum material;

(b) dividing said concentrated stock inoculum material into subsets thereof and providing a subset to a different propagation factory or plant, each of said subsets having a quality sufficient to inoculate a cultivation medium at different propagation factories or plants, and

(c) inoculating said cultivation medium at the different propagation factory or plant with the subset of the stock inoculum material by direct, one step inoculation to produce said starter culture,

wherein said stock inoculum material is subjected to a quality test before use and is stored for at least 24 hours prior to said inoculating of the cultivation medium,

such that, when steps (ii) through (iii) are repeated with another subset of the stock inoculum material at a different propagation factory or plant, the supply of starter cultures has a consistent quality.

2. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the inoculum material provided in step (i) is in quantities sufficient to inoculate at least 50,000 litres of cultivation medium.

3. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the concentrated stock inoculum material provided in step (a) contains at least 10^8 CFU per g.

4. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the subset of the stock inoculum material in step (c) is directly inoculated in the cultivation medium at a rate of maximum 0.1%.

5. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the amount of the subset of the stock inoculum material for direct inoculation of the cultivation medium in step (c) provides a ratio of the CFU per g of cultivation medium, immediately after inoculation, relative to the CFU per g of the subset of the stock inoculum material being inoculated, said ratio being in the range from 1:100 to 1:100,000.

6. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the cultivation medium immediately after the inoculation in step (c) contains a number of CFU per g of cultivation medium which is at least 10^5.

7. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the cultivation medium in step (ii) comprises any conventional medium used for propagation of microbial cells.

8. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the inoculum material and/or the subset of the stock inoculum material is in a state selected from the group consisting of a liquid, frozen and dried state.

9. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 8, wherein the frozen subset of the stock inoculum material is thawed before direct inoculation of the cultivation medium in step (c).

10. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 8, wherein the subset of the stock inoculum material is combined with an aqueous medium to obtain a suspension of the cells before direct inoculation of the cultivation medium in step (c).

11. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the direct inoculation of the cultivation medium in step (c) is provided under aseptical conditions or under substantially aseptical conditions.

12. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the stock inoculum material is supplied in sealed enclosures.

13. (Original) A method according to claim 12, wherein the sealed enclosures are made of a flexible material selected from the group consisting of a polyolefin, a substituted olefin, a copolymer of ethylene, a polypropylene, a polyethylene, a polyester, a polycarbonate, a polyamide, an acrylonitrile and a cellulose derivative.

14. (Original) A method according to claim 12, wherein the sealed enclosed are made of a flexible material comprising a metal foil.

15. (Original) A method according to claim 12, wherein the sealed enclosures have a cubic content of at least 0.01 litre.

16. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 12, wherein the sealed enclosures are supplied with outlet means for connection of the enclosure to a container comprising the cultivation medium, said outlet means permitting the concentrate of cells to be introduced substantially aseptically into the container to inoculate the cultivation medium with said concentrate of cells.

17. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the starter culture organism in step (i) originates from a species selected from the group consisting of a lactic acid bacterial species, a *Bifidobacterium* species, a *Propionibacterium* species, a *Staphylococcus* species, a *Micrococcus* species, a *Bacillus*, species, an *Actinomycetes* species, a *Corynebacterium* species, a *Brevibacterium* species, a *Pediococcus* species, a *Pseudomonas* species, a *Sphingomonas* species, a *Mycobacterium* species, a *Rhodococcus* species, an *Enterobacteriaceae* species, a fungal species and a yeast species.

18. (Original) A method according to claim 17, wherein the lactic acid bacterial species is selected from the group consisting of *Lactococcus* spp., *Lactobacillus* spp., *Leuconostoc* spp., *Pediococcus* spp., *Oenococcus* spp. and *Streptococcus* spp.

19. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the inoculum material in step (i) comprises at least two starter culture strains.

20. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the starter culture is a starter culture used in the food industry, feed industry or pharmaceutical industry.

21. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the starter culture is used for inoculation of milk which is further processed to obtain a dairy product, which is selected from the group consisting of cheese, yogurt, butter, inoculated sweet milk and a liquid fermented milk product.

22. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 1, wherein the cells being propagated in the cultivation medium express a desired gene product or produce a desired product.

23. (Original) A method according to claim 22, wherein the desired gene product is selected from the group consisting of enzymes, pharmaceutically active substances, polysaccharides and amino acids.

24. (Original) A method according to claim 22, wherein the desired product is selected from the group consisting of pigments, flavouring compounds, emulsifiers, vitamins, growth-stimulating compounds, food additives and feed additives.

25. (Previously Presented) A method according to claim 7, wherein the medium comprises one or more single milk components.

26. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 25, wherein one or more single milk components include skimmed milk.

27. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein steps (ii) through (iii) are repeated with another subset of the stock inoculum material and wherein the supply of starter cultures resulting from each inoculation has a consistent quality.

28. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, wherein step (b) comprises providing a plurality of said subsets to different propagation factories or plants[, respectively].

29. (New) The method of claim 1, wherein the stock inoculum material or a subset thereof is subjected to a quality test selected from the group consisting of Test for

contamination, Count of total viable cells, Determination of colony morphology, Determination of purity, Determination of metabolic activity, Phage test, API test, Resistance to bacteriophages, Determination of the content of *Listeria* species and salmonella species, DNA fingerprint, and Fermentation test.

30. (New) The method of claim 1, wherein the stock inoculum material is stored for at least 48 hours prior to being added to the cultivation medium.

31. (New) The method of claim 1, wherein the stock inoculum material or a subset thereof is transported or shipped to the different propagation factory or plant in a sealed enclosure.